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Standard Guide for Consideration of Bioremediation as an Oil Spill Response Method on Land¹

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1. Scope

1.1 The goal of this guide is to provide recommendations for the use of biodegradation enhancing agents for remediating oil spills in terrestrial environments.

1.2 This is a general guide only, assuming the bioremediation agent to be safe, effective, available, and applied in accordance with both manufacturers' recommendations and relevant environmental regulations. As referred to in this guide, oil includes crude and refined petroleum products.

1.3 This guide addresses the application of bioremediation agents alone or in conjunction with other technologies, following spills on surface terrestrial environments.

1.4 This guide does not consider the ecological effects of bioremediation agents.

1.5 This guide applies to all terrestrial environments. Specifically, it addresses various technological applications used in these environments.

1.6 In making bioremediation-use decisions, appropriate government authorities must be consulted as required by law.

1.7 *This standard does not purport to address all of the safety concerns, if any, associated with its use. It is the responsibility of the user of this standard to establish appropriate safety, health, and environmental practices and determine the applicability of regulatory limitations prior to use. In addition, it is the responsibility of the user to ensure that such activity takes place under the control and direction of a qualified person with full knowledge of any potential or appropriate safety and health protocols.*

1.8 *This international standard was developed in accordance with internationally recognized principles on standardization established in the Decision on Principles for the Development of International Standards, Guides and Recommendations issued by the World Trade Organization Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) Committee.*

¹ This guide is under the jurisdiction of ASTM Committee F20 on Hazardous Substances and Oil Spill Response and is the direct responsibility of Subcommittee F20.13 on Treatment.

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2. Terminology

2.1 *Definitions:*

2.1.1 *aerobes*—organisms that require air or free oxygen for growth.

2.1.2 *anaerobes*—organisms that grow in the absence of air or oxygen and do not use molecular oxygen in respiration.

2.1.3 *bioaugmentation*—the addition of microorganisms (usually predominantly bacteria) to increase the biodegradation rate of target pollutants.

2.1.4 *biodegradation*—chemical alteration and breakdown of a substance, usually to smaller products, caused by microorganisms or their enzymes.

2.1.5 *bioremediation*—enhancement of biodegradation.

2.1.6 *bioremediation agents*—inorganic and organic compounds and microorganisms that are added to enhance degradation processes, predominantly microbial.

2.1.7 *biostimulation*—the addition of microbial nutrients, oxygen, heat, or water, or some combination thereof, to enhance the rate of biodegradation of target pollutants by indigenous species (predominantly bacteria).

2.1.8 *ecosystem*—organisms and the surrounding environment combined in a community that is self-supporting.

3. Significance and Use

3.1 The purpose of this guide is to provide remediation managers and spill response teams with guidance on bioremediation.

3.2 Bioremediation is one of many available tools and may not be applicable to all situations. This guide can be used in conjunction with other ASTM guides addressing oil spill response operations.

4. General Considerations for Bioremediation Use

4.1 Bioremediation technologies attempt to accelerate the natural rate of biodegradation. In situ, solid-phase, and slurry-phase represent the major bioremediation technologies used. These technologies may be unnecessary in those cases in which the natural rate of biodegradation suffices, such as for thin films. The use of adequate controls in preliminary field studies, or the results of previously reported studies, will assist in

determining the extent to which microorganism or nutrient amendments, or both, are necessary to obtain the desired rate of degradation.

4.2 Bioremediation performance depends on the efficiency of the petroleum hydrocarbon degrading indigenous microorganisms or bioaugmentation agents. Performance also depends on the availability of rate-limiting nutrients and the susceptibility of the target crude oil or refined product to microbial degradation. As oil consists of hundreds or more compounds, many of which require different conditions or different microorganisms to degrade, oil biodegradation should not be considered a single process. Oil biodegradation should at least consider the aliphatics separate from the aromatic compounds. Some compounds may degrade to other compounds which may be toxic or less biodegradable. Other classes of compounds often degrade to a lesser degree, these classes include resins, asphaltenes, large aliphatics and large aromatics (1, 2)².

4.2.1 In general, aerobic bioremediation systems degrade oil more rapidly than anaerobic systems, and adequate aeration may be the most promising approach in many cases.

4.2.2 Numerous microorganisms, represented by hundreds of species, are responsible for the degradation of the oil. Various texts describe the biodegradability and biodegradation rates of a variety of organic compounds present in oil (3, 4, 5).

4.2.3 The biodegradation of aliphatic and aromatic hydrocarbons in the absence of molecular oxygen is generally slower than under aerobic conditions. Anaerobic biodegradation has been characterized under sulfate-reducing, nitrate-reducing and methanogenic conditions (6, 7).

4.3 Bioremediation must be conducted under the guidance of qualified personnel who understand the safety and health aspects of site activities.

5. Background

5.1 Approaches to bioremediation for oil spill response include biostimulation, the addition of nutrients, oxygen, heat, or water, or combination thereof, to stimulate indigenous microorganisms, and bioaugmentation, the addition of oil-degrading microorganisms, which may be used in combination with biostimulation (8-17). As a precaution, it should be noted that nutrient components may be toxic or harmful to plants, animals, and humans, and that non-indigenous species may alter the indigenous microbial ecological balance at least temporarily. Indigenous microbes have been found to be more effective than non-indigenous microbes (14, 18). Water effluent nitrate levels, which can affect drinking water sources, should be minimized to diminish risks of health issues. Similarly, excessive ammonium levels should be avoided because they can affect fish and invertebrates, since many are immobile and cannot avoid the treated area. Therefore, nitrogen and other nutrient levels should be monitored. Instructions to ensure safety and effective product use should be established by the manufacturer or supplier for each commercial microbial product, and specific instructions should be followed by the product user.

² The boldface numbers in parentheses refer to a list of references at the end of this standard.

5.1.1 Biostimulation has been shown to enhance the biodegradation of terrestrial oil spills. Biostimulation uses the addition of appropriate nutrients (for example, nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium, micronutrients, and so forth), oxygen, heat, or water, which may have been limiting factors. If microbial degraders of the target oil contaminants are present in the soil or contaminated waters, these approaches usually lead to increases in the rate of degradation. In some cases, there may not be a sufficient indigenous oil-degrading population to stimulate. This may be the case in environments in which the degrader population has not developed. Alternately, the toxic nature of the petroleum product may diminish or eliminate microorganisms. Also, the excavation of soil from anoxic zones and subsequent relocation to an oxygen-rich environment may result in a lack of microbial degraders due to the drastic change in conditions. The microbial response to biostimulation may include a lag period (weeks to months) for the growth or natural selection of degraders to occur. Microorganisms, as well as oil contaminants, should be monitored throughout the process to establish efficacy and safety.

5.1.2 Bioaugmentation may use commercial microbial products, on-site production of microbes from stock cultures, or laboratory isolation, characterization, and subsequent production of microbes from the particular site (or another site similar in soil and contaminant characteristics). This approach may increase soil microbe concentrations rapidly. Microbes selected must be nonpathogenic and must metabolize the oil contaminant(s), reducing toxicity. Growth requirements of the microbes need to be well understood. Their growth rate is controlled by the limiting growth conditions of temperature, pH, nutrients, water, oxygen, the contaminated medium (soil, sludge, and water), and oil. Microorganisms as well as oil components should be monitored to establish efficacy and safety. Addition of non-indigenous microbes has not been found to be highly effective (14, 18).

5.1.3 While apparently safe and effective in the laboratory setting, genetically engineered oil-degrading microorganisms have only rarely been authorized for environmental release (for example, 19).

5.2 There are several bioremediation technologies available. It is important to understand the potential use of these systems when assessing their applicability for full-scale implementation. Costs are determined by the size of the site, soil properties, type and level of oil contaminant(s), goals, time allowed for attaining the goals, and testing requirements.

5.3 *In situ* bioremediation occurs without excavation of the contaminated soil. This technology relies predominantly on the enhanced degradation of oil by bacteria following the addition of nutrients, air, oxygen or oxygen-releasing compounds, and moisture. This has usually been demonstrated through the use of indigenous microorganisms. Ground-water treatment may be achieved simultaneously or through pump and *ex situ* treatment methods. Anaerobic biodegradation systems can also be promoted; however, their utility has been limited to date. Since soil is not excavated, volatile release is limited, and the risks and costs associated with excavation and treatment are reduced.

5.3.1 Bioventing involves the introduction of air under pressure to the unsaturated zone of contaminated soil. The process pulls or pushes air into the soil for use by the aerobic microorganisms. Although the purpose is to deliver oxygen required by the microbes, it may dry the soil and require the addition of moisture. Furthermore, the flow of air will desorb some of the more volatile components from the soil (for example, gasoline-contaminated soil), and the exhaust gases may have to be treated. Successful treatment requires adequate soil porosity, moisture, nutrients, and microorganisms with the appropriate biodegradation abilities. Additives may be provided at or near the surface to percolate through the treatment zone.

5.3.2 Biosparging is similar to bioventing except that air is injected directly into the ground below the water table in the saturated zones, and contaminant volatility (and subsequent treatment) is encouraged. Although the purpose is to deliver oxygen required by the microbes, vacuum pumps are often used to recover vapors for treatment prior to discharge. Nutrients and microbes may be added in the injection well to stimulate and augment biodegradation.

5.4 Solid-phase bioremediation treats soils above ground, primarily in contained treatment cells or tanks. Techniques similar to landfarming are used, including irrigation, tilling, and nutrient and microbe additions. As with *in situ* bioremediation, treatment can involve biostimulation or bioaugmentation. Losses through volatilization and leaching can be minimized through treatment design and implementation. The contaminated soil is contained, and is defined with respect to the volume and concentration of the oil, especially as the soil is homogenized during processing.

6. Methodologies

6.1 A comprehensive contaminated materials handling plan (CMHP) should be developed prior to excavation and treatment. It may include the designation of a materials staging area present within the treatment facility and equipment decontamination within delineated exclusion zones.

6.2 A comprehensive health and safety program should be in effect throughout the remediation project. This program may include medical examinations of employees, contact and respiratory protection, and air, soil, and water monitoring.

6.3 The treatment facility should contain appropriate protection from rainfall and flooding, and facilities to handle excess water at the site. After the appropriate soil moisture content is determined for the specific treatment, a moisture budget should be calculated. This should maintain the proper moisture content balance between moisture added by irrigation and rainfall, and moisture lost through evaporation, transpiration, and percolation.

6.4 Solid heaping involves piling the contaminated soil to several meters, usually over a network of perforated piping that may be layered throughout. Nutrients, water, and microorganisms are added, and air is drawn through the pipes by vacuum. The vacuum system exhaust may be treated prior to discharge, effectively removing airborne volatile or semi-volatile components. Advantages include a requirement for less space and less

material handling compared with solid-phase treatment (landfarming), and diminished volatile losses. Leachates are collected and treated, recirculated or discharged.

6.5 Composting promotes biodegradation in stored wastes by adding bulking agents (biodegradable or non-biodegradable) that enhance soil permeability. The biologic decaying process is often thermophilic, thus limiting the types of microbes and associated degradation rates. Three basic systems have been used. “Open windrow” stacks the waste in long piles that are aerated through constant excavation and reconstruction. “Static windrow” is similar to heap methods, laying the soil over a network of perforated pipes that aerate through forced air. “In-vessel” methods enclose the soil in a closed reactor that aerates and mixes the soil both physically and by means of forced air. The material remaining after treatment can serve as a source for fill, cover, and landscaping material.

6.6 Slurry-phase bioremediation combines contaminated solids (soil, sludge, sediment) and liquids to form a slurry suspension. The slurry is supplemented with nutrients, air or oxygen-releasing chemicals, or microorganisms, or a combination thereof, in a bioreactor system. The slurry is stirred or agitated to enhance contact between the oil, nutrients, and microbes. The system may be designed as a batch or continuous flow process. Frequently, slurry-phase bioremediation is combined with other (physical, chemical or other biological) processes in a treatment train. These systems treat contaminated soil and water. Bioreactors promote optimal conditions while minimizing volatile losses, resulting from the design of the system and the type and amount of oil in the solid or liquid matrix. Compared with solid phase treatment, time is generally reduced when using bioreactors. The slurries are comprised of approximately 10 to 30 % w/v soil in water, and may require multiple batch treatments to process the total soil volume depending on reactor size and number. Hydrocarbons in high concentrations, as well as fines from soil washing can be treated. Slurry phase systems can be cumbersome and require extensive mechanical and technological construction and design, and maintenance. The costs for slurry phase treatment are generally higher in comparison to solid phase treatment.

7. Bioremediation Technology Selection Assessment

7.1 Treatability studies provide data to support treatment selection and are performed prior to remedy selection. The data indicate whether treatment goals can be met and further determine the optimal operation conditions for remediation project design. For example, documents prepared by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (U.S. EPA) mentions three levels of treatability studies (15-17). The level of study chosen depends on available literature information, technical expertise, and site-specific considerations. In addition, treatability study design and interpretation for aerobic biodegradation screening has been addressed.

7.2 Various government agencies require support documentation. Studies are available through databases developed by groups sponsored by the U.S. EPA and Environment Canada.

7.3 Governmental agencies may regulate the use of bioremediation agents.